

Developing Positive Relationships with Families Welcoming, Honoring, and Connecting

In research on factors that lead to successful educational partnerships between schools and families, Karen Mapp asked parents to identify what school staff actually did that created trusting and respectful relationships.

Mapp found that high-performing, low-income schools **welcome, honor, and connect** families with student success as the focus. Karen Mapp calls this “The Joining Process” and found that it creates a school where “everyone feels like members of a family.”

Parents respond by becoming loyal members of the school community and eagerly taking part in their children’s education. Practices that foster trusting and respectful relationships identified by parents include:

Develop Relationships

- Put out the welcome mat (reserved parking spots for parents and visitors, welcome signs, directions)
- Engage the whole family – tours of the school, home visits, and a mentoring system
- Create a warm, friendly building that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community
- Display student work throughout the school buildings with clear explanations and purpose
- Make sure that the principal or someone representing him/her is always accessible
- Set customer service standards for office staff and others that greet families and guests
- Put on the personal touch – small meetings, one-to-one talks, a family center

Deepen Relationships

- Show respect at all times. Ask parents for their advice – and take it
- Create structures for including parents in major decisions about their children and the school
- Recognize families’ contributions and thank them for their help
- Respect families’ circumstances – offer translators, convenient times, childcare
- Set ground rules together – such as procedures for classroom observations
- Accentuate the positive and focus on solutions to challenges – apply no negative labels to anyone

Link Families to Student Learning and Sustain Relationships

- Link parent activities to what students are learning and doing in class
- Exhibit student work and send graded work home every week
- Make home visits to find out child’s talents and interests, explain teacher expectations, and leave learning materials families can use with children
- Show parents that student learning is a shared responsibility by keeping parents informed about what their kids are learning and how they can reinforce the learning
- Open a Family Center – create a warm place to gather, access learning materials and other resources

Adapted from: Mapp, K. 2003. “Having their say: Parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children’s education.” *School Community Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 1.

Ways to Communicate and Build Relationships with Families

The following chart provides suggested practices that foster trusting and respectful relationships with families and communities. Use this chart to reflect on strategies that school staff can use to create trusting and positive relationships with families and communities. Add to the list as you plan for improving your school, family, and community partnership programs.

INSTEAD OF THIS	TRY THIS
“Who are you? What do you want?”	“Hello! Welcome to our school. How may I help you?”
“No Trespassing” signs	“Welcome” signs
Parent meetings dominated by the principal, school staff or a few PTA/PTO officers	Parent meetings broken into small discussion groups where everyone participates - each group picking a leader
Calling home only when a child acts out or is in danger of failing	Staying in touch with families with positive news about student accomplishments
Complaining about parents who don’t help their kids with homework	Sending home learning kits and interactive homework assignments and/or developing programs to show parents how to help with homework
Leaving parent involvement to the Assistant Principal or Teacher’s Aide	Meeting and greeting parents before and after school, and going to community events
Meeting only during school hours or on one set time and day	Rotating parent meetings before school, evenings, and weekends and at different times
Announcing a new reading program	Involving families in selecting a new reading program
Planning events, then publicizing them to parents	Surveying parents to get their ideas and interests before planning family activities
Talking at and about parents	Listening to and with parents

Adapted from: Henderson, Mapp, Davies and Johnson, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships* (New York: The New Press, 2007)



Staying Positive with Family-School Communication

Effective communication between home and school is the foundation of a solid partnership. When families and educators practice effective communication, positive relationships develop and students make greater progress.

Effective communication does not happen by accident. Teachers and administrators must be diligent in making sure communication is meaningful and positive and that teachers practice communication skills such as good listening techniques, kindness, tact, empathy and a true understanding of parent-child relationships.

When school staff reach out with the goal of building partnerships based on mutual respect and common purpose, families will respond and students will benefit.

Positive Assumptions Yield Positive Results

It is important to examine assumptions about families and understand that for the home/school partnership to be effective, the following core beliefs are essential.

- **Assume all parents and families love their children.**
Many family structures exist and all are legitimate. Parents or guardians may be absent from home or school for a variety of reasons, but this does not diminish their love and caring. Acknowledge the changes in what was once known as the traditional family structure.
- **Assume all children can and will learn and that all families have strengths to share.**
Also assume that parents want to help their children learn.
- **Assume all families want a positive school experience for their children.**
Trust families and assume that they will work to ensure positive experiences from their end. Both parents and educators are committed to the nurturing, development and progress of children. Teachers must believe that advocates and families play a critical role in a child's development.
- **Respect parents and families and communicate that respect.**
Tone of voice, body language, a teacher's enthusiasm, facial expressions, word choice and how long we make people wait all communicate respect or lack of it. Many family members have personal, work, health or other problems that we know nothing about. Avoid being judgmental.
- **Recognize that schools and homes have shared goals.**
Parents and families have important perspectives of their children. Expect all parents and families to partner with you in the educational process. Clarify your expectations from the beginning.
Help parents to understand their role in the educational process by:
 - asking parents what they want or need from their relationship with the school;
 - determining together, what you both need and expect from the student;
 - defining what those high expectations are; and
 - inviting them to attend professional development activities.



- ***Make sure parents feel welcome when they come to school.***

Ensure that the school has a parent handbook or volunteer manual, training procedures, parking spaces and a parent room so that parents can be welcomed and know they have an important place and role in the school.

- Be specific about parent roles, tasks and schedules.
- Thank and recognize parents regularly.
- Enlist parents to help reach other parents, but don't abdicate responsibility to one group.

Keep in mind that the responsibility for building partnerships between families and schools rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

- **Respect and Celebrate the Diversity that Students and Families Bring to School**